



Opinion

# Researching Rural Development: Selected Reflections

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**Abstract:** Reflections on research can take many forms. They inevitably contain positive memories of research that advanced our knowledge on issues of the day. They can also reflect dead ends and disappointments. Although research in rural development is generally a public endeavor (government, university and NGO supported projects), the effects felt by the researcher are often personal. Meeting peasants in the field, listening to abused farm women, and tracing livelihood transitions are all challenging for the researcher. Above all, making sense of research results for policy development is a daunting task, as there are many layers of dilution and deflection between researcher and policy maker. With these impediments and opportunities in mind, I offer some of my own reflections, in the form of an opinion piece, on rural development research over the past 50 years. The paper is organized into three parts: macro and micro level observations about the evolution and prevailing trends in rural development, and a third section on contemporary and future issues.

**Keywords:** rural research; policy modes; family farming; livelihoods; regional systems



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## 1. The Big Picture

In the big picture, several changes that have occurred in research are notable for their effect on research trends and practice. At the macro scale, there was the slow but sure acceptance that rural was indeed a research category and worthy of public sector and academic enquiry. Not everything outside of cities is agriculture. Over time, many ministries of agriculture added the term 'Rural' to their mandates as a result of research that showed the decline of agriculture as an important occupational sector, although its value in terms of production was ever to increase [1]. After the 'Let's Do Away with Rural' paper by Hoggart [2] in *The Journal of Rural Studies* in 1990, research then mused over the concept of rural itself [3]. Although rural development, re-stimulated by the 1974 World Bank Poverty report, was being practiced in various forms in the so-called third world, it was not fully formalized in the EU countries and North America until the early 1990s with the establishment of such programs as LEADER in Europe and the Community Futures Program in Canada [4].

Another macro-level change was the focus on 'place' as the unit of analysis and the introduction of place-based policy which allowed governments to promote rural development across sectors in a form of regional development. Up to that point, the prevailing sector policy approach inevitably gave precedence to urban centers, whilst the place-based territorial idea enabled scholars to focus on rural areas as whole systems with some form of internal logic [5]. Concepts of interdependent systems and nested spaces can be fruitful, but little systematic research has been applied outside of the EU.

In terms of the conceptual construction of research, two points stand out as on-going research limitations: the dominance of the 'project' and the tendency to use dichotomies as conceptual and methodological starting points. Most research undertakings are project based, with donor control over time as well as scale and output geared to university timeframes and institutional procedures. For example, ethics approval in some institutions can take several months, and matching research with donor timetables such as fiscal years is often problematic. This is especially the case when there are several research institutions

involved. In addition, simple binaries such as urban/rural and part-time/full-time are overused for comparative purposes. On the positive side, research undertakings that engage multiple researchers, their disciplines and their institutions, in different countries, have proliferated and, although sometimes difficult to manage, have become powerful data-based, multi-disciplinary, multi-state research endeavors.

## 2. The Micro-Scale

It is significant that social science research councils and leading researchers have maintained an active interest in rural studies. Apart from the questions of rural poverty, the economics of agriculture, and latterly the environmental impacts of farming, this has mainly been manifest as a periodic focus on the core unit of agricultural production: the family farm. In the late 1960s, when the family farm was considered almost universal in North America and a common feature of farming in Europe, studies by rural sociologists and extension agents focused on technical improvements and the adoption of innovations, while examining the characteristics of farmers and their decision-making abilities. Although the embeddedness between land grant institutions and agricultural industries was challenged by Newby and Buttel [6], the table had been set for a generation of research based on innovation and concepts of leading and lagging farmers and leading and lagging areas. In addition, this phase also came with many bad habits in the research process: treating farmers as the sole decision makers in the farm household, viewing farmers as predominantly male, accepting farm size as a predictable measure of business size, etc. From these largely uncontested assumptions flowed many errors such as assuming that a farmer who worked off the farm for part of 'his' time was a part-time farmer, and the farm unit of less productive value than a so-called full-time farm. When these false assumptions which drew agrarian studies down various 'rabbit holes' were exposed in several debates in the 1980s, new and better constructions such as multiple job holding and 'pluriactivity' were usefully introduced. The key change in the research approach was to include the farm family as the key unit of agrarian research at this level, later to be understood as the 'farm household'. This enabled 'multifunctionality' to be introduced and promoted, at first as an opportunity for environmental management of farm landscapes.

This empirical shift in basic assumptions about farm household development also meant that the role of women, siblings and farm workers could be included in socio-economic research, leading to such research themes as the 'feminization of agriculture' and assessing the importance of farm succession. Even the livelihood differences between on-farm/non-agricultural work and off-farm work in household labor systems proved useful. Many of the questions posed at this time about the survival of the peasantry, the growing awareness of the predations of the productivist mode of farming and the insights about agrotourism were useful questions for the rural social science research community.

## 3. Today

After about 25 years of being careful to define their terms and units of analysis, many researchers seem to have returned once again to making preliminary assumptions about the research question that invariably invalidate much of their findings. In addition, the increasing reliance, supported by the journals, on models and quantitative techniques has replaced ethnographic style enquiries at the village or household level. Algorithms tell us something about how farmers behave, especially in terms of ordering farm supplies, and choice models tell us how farm households will spend their incomes. Although useful in a general sense in helping to contextualize rural debates, models inevitably require data inputs that are often hard to find and frequently modelling is reduced to using 3–5 variables. Certainly, many leading journals are complicit in this in that they and their reviewers require 'hard' data to support the arguments in most submitted papers. The use of the term 'soft data' has done little to alleviate this unhelpful dichotomy.

Many problems have also arisen on the qualitative side of the debate. Endless case studies have led to only a few methods for assembling and assessing collective insights.

Qualitative researchers have sometimes become sloppy in formulating a research question and tend to rely on subjective arguments rather than on clear theoretical intent and flexible field-research frameworks. The casual use of livelihood thinking, for example, requires clear formulation of the assumptions and the measures to support or test such assumptions. Sometimes there are methodologies looking for a research question. Much careful preparatory thinking is required before the methods are designed and tested for use in the field. In such an approach, the analytical questions and tools become more obvious and can lead to innovation. Let's face it, endless hypothesis testing has limited value unless carefully contextualized.

What is puzzling, however, has been the comparative lack of 'ideas' on agro-rural development. For example, how best are we to treat the enduring reality of the family farm and, more importantly, the farm family in socio-economic research? What are the ways for researchers to include environmental measures automatically in their work? Fei Xiaotong in 1947 expressed the fundamental difference between all households and those of farmers in China as being one of possession of land. Land is fixed geographically and so therefore is the farmer in a form of land-locked system. Although there are today many ways farmers can act freely without their land (labor substitution, rental, inviting replacement farmers, etc.), the basic attachment to land and identity still prevails. Despite the research work of Chayanov [7] and Van der Ploeg [8] on old and new peasant household systems, the work of Friedmann [9] on petty commodity production, Fuller et al. [10] on pluriactivity and the symbolic functions of family farms by Sutherland [11], there is still no unifying concept or new theory on family farming.

Family farming is not a holy grail; no right answer is one day to be revealed. Useful ideas from the past on the economic and social durability of small farms we have. The sustainability of the concept, its utility (and for whom) and its ecological integrity form one of the burgeoning questions for the near future. It is in this context that I am reminded of the theory of the task-orientated society developed by Benvenuti in the late 1960s [12]. Family farmers, considered to be 'the salt of the earth' by most commentators and revered as such in agricultural circles for their independence, hard work and spiritual ethics, are seen by Benvenuti as being task orientated, that is, they are assigned the task of growing food within the parameters organized by the state and with many forms of guidance and support. Overall direction ('big is better', based on 'economies of scale') comes in the form of state-run agricultural college curriculums and research institutes, myriad forms of training, and targeted fiscal incentives. Over time, the state's agricultural development management system has often been blurred with that of the corporate sector and 'economy' has come to have several meanings; the equation is no longer solely focused on the efficiency of the farm production system, but on the competitiveness of the food manufacturing sector in general and in controlling the supply of food and materials for the international market. Seeds, for example, have been commodified and industrialized in a way that creates farmer dependencies in much of the developing world [13].

Not all is doom and gloom, however, as many rich veins of learning about rural development policy have accumulated to indicate a more encouraging research future. The work of Dax [14] exemplifies the multi-dimensional nature of rural development and the need for cross-cutting ideas about how best to promote sustainable development. This suggests we invest more in complex systems thinking and the many interdependencies that make up rural areas. Research methods and project management need to be redesigned to allow for creative improvements in the theory and practice of rural development. Greater research emphasis on environmental vulnerabilities and possibilities in rural systems would be a good place to begin.

*In the belief that it is always wise to end a statement on a positive note, I would like to acknowledge the creative instincts and dedication of the many scholars with whom I have worked.*

#### 4. Author's Credentials

Tony Fuller spent three years in North Italy looking at the agricultural geography of the Val Nure for his doctorate, 1966–1970. After his appointment to the University of Guelph, Canada, he spent six years as director of the Rural Development Outreach Project, a program supported by the Kellogg Foundation, to help make research in agricultural universities in North America more relevant to local and regional rural needs. He spent five years as advisor to the Arkleton Trust on the Multiple Job Holding Farm Households project in 12 countries of Europe; was Co-Founder of the Agriculture and Research Restructuring Group in Canada and the International Comparative Rural Policy series of Summer Schools for masters and doctoral students in Canada, USA, Mexico and Europe; undertook stints researching the Arena Society, Asset Mapping and the Complex Adaptive Systems concepts; and, finally, in retirement, taught and edited for ten years as Visiting Professor at the China Agriculture University and as International Senior Visiting scholar at the China Academy of Sciences (Geography division) in Beijing, China.

Much of his research experience is summarized as a chapter in a book edited by Hans Bakker in 2015.

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